

BROKEN GLASS

Georgia Wood Pangborn



"CAN'T stay but a minute," said Mrs. Waring, spreading her long hands above the wood blaze. "I was taking my evening constitutional over the moors. Did you see the sunset? And the firelight dancing in your open windows was so dear and sweet and homy I had to come. Babies in bed?"

"Oh, yes. Such perfectly good six-o'clock babies! I can tuck them up myself and still have time to dress safe from sticky fingers. Delia is such a blessing. So big and soft and without any nerves, and really and truly fond of them. When she leaves me for a day I am perfectly wild and lost."

"What is the matter with us women," said Mrs. Waring frowningly, "that we can't take care of our own children and run our own houses, to say nothing of spinning and weaving as our grandmothers did? My grandmother was a Western pioneer and brought up six without help, and—buried three. Think of it! To lose a child—" A strong shudder went through her delicate body. "How can a woman live after that? We can gasp through the bearing—you and I know that—but to lose—" She covered her face with her ringed hands.

"But, my dear," said the sleek woman by the fire, "your babies are such little Samsons! That nightmare ought not to bother you now."

"No. It oughtn't. That it does so only shows the more our modern unfitness."

"I suppose our grandmothers must have been more of the Delia type."

"And yet we think the Delia type inferior. It's solid and quiet and stupid—not always honest, but it succeeds with children. You and I are reckoned among the cultured. We read—in three languages—and write magazine verse. Your nocturne is to be given in concert next week—yet I think that Delia and her type rather despise us because we are wrecks after spending an afternoon trying to keep a creeping baby from choking and bumping and burning

and taking cold, or reading Peter Rabbit the fiftieth time to Miss Going-on-Three."

"The question is," said Mrs. Waring coiling bonelessly in the Morris chair, "what will our children be? You and I may be inferior, but," she caught her lower lip in her teeth, "my babies came to me after I was thirty, and I know their value, as your Delia type or your grandmother type doesn't for all her motherliness. When women are mothers in the early twenties they don't know. They can't. My music filled in those years. Filled them! It served to express the despair of a barren woman—that was all. Since they came fools have consoled with me because I have had to give up my 'career' for their sake. Career!" She threw back her head with a savage laugh, and stood up with her hands in her coat pocket. "Here," her voice growing very gentle and humorous as she took out the tatters of a little book gay with red and green, "give me some paste. I promised to mend it. She has read it to pieces at last. I thought I could rhyme about sunsets and love and death, but nobody ever loved my rhymes as she loves this. Let's write some children's verses, you and I—"

"Goldilocks was naughty, she began to sulk and pout;
She threw aside her playthings—"

That's the way, you see, not—

"When from the sessions of sweet silent thought."

She had seated herself at the big flat-topped desk as she spoke and was deftly pasting and mending.

"I've written one; or Tommy has. We were sitting up with his first double tooth. We had taken a go-cart ride in the early moonlight and I was taking cows as an example of people who chew properly. So we got up a song—(past one o'clock it was and a dark and stormy morning)—"

"The moon goes sailing through the sky
The cows are chewing—chewing—"

"He liked that but when he'd had it fifty times he changed it—

"The cows go sailing through the sky
The moon is chewing—chewing—"

"And it is better that way; I can recommend it as a lullaby."

"Thanks, but I've some of my own pretty nearly as good. A Norwegian maid left me a legacy—

"Go away du Fisker mand
Catch a pretty fish fish—sh—sh
Bring it home to baby boy
Quicker than a wish—wish—shsh."

"That's not bad; I'll remember it when the moon's chewing palls. . . .

"As I was saying, you and I know the value of our children even if our type is inferior to the Delia type; and if we were bereft of our Delias and didn't have to dress for dinner and had no time to read we should show up quite as well as the Delias.

"We use the Delias for them because we want them to have everything of the best. Delias *are* best when they're little. We enter later on. We couldn't nurse our babies. All that part of us was metamorphosed into brain—thanks to a mistaken education. Very well; we must nourish them with our brains. We can. And we go and get the best service we can, maids and nurses; we bring them home to our nests like cats bringing mice—for the babies. . . .

"But I'm afraid I've got to let Aileen go. She told Martha a story about Indians carrying off children and nearly scared the child to death. And when I went to find them yesterday afternoon over by the empty Taylor cottage, they were playing where a window had been broken and there was broken glass everywhere. It was like dancing on knives. My spine shivers with it still. And there sat Aileen—so lost in a dream that I had to put my hand on her shoulder to rouse her. 'Oh,' said she, when I showed her the glass, 'I thought it was ice!' She cried when I told her what a terribly dangerous thing she had done. Her tears come easily enough. A pretty little thing, but *so* stupid. I must do better for Martha."

"I thought," said Mrs. Blake hesitatingly, "that she didn't seem very warmly dressed the other day."

"I don't know why she shouldn't be. I gave her a very good coat. Come to think of it, she hasn't worn it. I wonder why?"

"My Delia told me she had a sister. Perhaps—"

"Sponging on her. Poor child! I like her—but, Martha dancing on broken glass. . . . There, that's done. Now, Martha can read it a hundred times more—'Goldilocks was naughty.'"

"Now I must go—and dress. Symbol of degeneracy, as worn; but of all that raises us above the Delias, if we *are* above them."

The road was icy and ill kept. Some half-dozen cottages with boarded windows showed silent and black against the red band of sunset and the gray, waving line of moors. The pound of winter surf was like distant hoof-beats over the frozen land. The only cottages that were open had children in them. Air is what we give them now. Air and careful food for the rearing of the best of the next generation. And for that purpose the half-dozen cottages on that island kept their warmth and life all winter, just for the sake of properly reddening the cheeks of a dozen little children for whom city streets and parks are not supposed to furnish enough of air.

"Lovely—lovely," thought Mrs. Waring as she walked crisply toward her own fair window. "The moors and the winter storms shall make up to them for having a middle-aged mother. They shall have all the youth and vigor that I had not—that I had not."

Suddenly she faced about. It was not a footfall or a sigh or a spoken word, though it gave the impression of all three. Something behind her had betrayed its presence. . . .

No. There was nothing.

"The wind in the grass," she thought, but was not satisfied. A caretaker had been murdered on the other side of the island the winter before. Being the mother of a Martha makes one a coward. If there were no Martha one would go striding anywhere disregarding fantastic dangers, but *when* there is a Martha, who waits at home for a mother to read the story of Goldilocks one hundred times more, why, a mother must not let the least shadow of danger come near her. Because there are so many ways besides reading Goldilocks in which a mother may be useful.

Therefore she thought sharply about the dead care-taker and vowed that on her next constitutional she would carry a pistol in her pocket—for Martha's sake. The black hedges with their white spots of snow gave no sign; the road behind and in front showed empty but for the gleam of frozen puddles. The wind rattled lightly in the frozen grass. . . .

"I hope ye'll excuse me, mum—" The voice was deprecatory and, thank Heaven, a woman's; though where she had come from out of all that emptiness—

"Ah!" gasped Martha's mother.

"I didn't want to scare ye, mum."

"I can't stop," said Mrs. Waring. "If you want to talk to me come to the house. I must get home to—to—"

"Yes, mum; I know, mum, to your little girl. But I can keep pace with you, by your leave, mum, for I was wishin' to speak to you about Aileen—"

"My nurse maid?"

"The same. I was hearin' she was not givin' ye satisfaction, mum, and would like to speak a word for her—widout offence."

"I have not complained of Aileen. It is true she is sometimes thoughtless. May I ask—"

The woman's figure was so shrouded and huddled that Mrs. Waring, looking all she could, might not distinguish the features. She fancied a resemblance to Mrs. Magillicuddy who came every week to help with the washing. No doubt it was Mrs. Magillicuddy. That would account for her knowledge of Aileen.

Mrs. Waring felt a twinge of annoyance at the thought of Aileen's complaining to Mrs. Magillicuddy. She walked on rapidly, but the other kept as close as her shadow.

"You mean, I suppose, about the broken glass."

"It was very bad, mum; so bad that . . . yet there's worse than broken glass in the world. There's other things that seems no more than the glitter of harmless ice and is really daggers for your heart's blood . . . an' so I was wishin' to speak to ye a word about Aileen. As to the glass, mum, there was no real harm done, an' could ye have seen the lass cryin' her eyes out in her little room that night. . . . Not because ye'd scolded her, but because she'd been that careless. And she could not sleep the night, that tender heart, for secin' the baby

welterin' in gore that never was shed at all. Och—those eyes wid tears in them! Surely, mum—surely, ye must have noticed the eyes of her when she looks up at ye wid the hope in them that maybe she has pleased ye? Remember this is her first place and that she was reared gently among the sisters, orphanage as it was, and knows as little of the world as a fine lady-girl when she comes out from *her* convent school. She is not yet used to the rough ways of servants. . . .

"But she will be soon. Ah, wirra, wirra, she will be soon. . . .

"I would like her to stay wid ye. . . . I little thought, ten years ago, that she would be eatin' the bitter bread of service, for bitter it must be, however soft the life; bitter and dangerous for a young girl that is all alone and knows nothin' at all of the world's wickedness. . . . Do ye blame her for not seein' the broken glass? Can ye not guess that the eyes of her were blind with tears for a harsh word ye had given her about mixin' up the big baby's stockings with the little ones? Do ye mind that each of your children has two dozen little rolled up balls of stockings to be looked after and that they are very near of a size—very near? My Aileen—she never had but two pairs at a time and she washes out the wan pair at night so she can change to the other. And do ye mind that hers are thin cotton—twelve cints the pair they are—and her feet are cold to break yer heart as she sits in the cold wind watchin' your little girl at play, so warm in her English woollen stockings and leggins. And have ye ever been into Aileen's room? Do ye know that the fine gilt radiator in it is never warm and that she has but one thin blanket and a comforter so ragged your dog would scorn it? And when she had a bit of a cough ye were afraid it might be consumption, ye said, and if so ye couldn't have her with the children—"

"You seem to know my house and my servants remarkably well, Mrs. Magillicuddy. I will see to Aileen's room at once. I have been very busy, but—really—"

"Ah, save yer anger, mum, for one that deserves it. He's not far away. I am not angry with you, mum, though well I might be. I know with what love ye love yer own. But the world is so large and in such need of the kind and wise that, when one is truly kind and wise like you, mum, it is accounted a sin to let your kindness and wisdom go no

further than the soft small heads that are your own. . . . There are so many children without any mothers at all . . . as yours might be had I been what you feared but now. . . .

"Broken glass! Is it not worse than broken glass for a young thing like that, as white-souled as that bit of snow on the hedge—have ye ever heard the talk of house servants? And the only place she can go to get away from it when ye do not want her for your children is her own little room that is so cold.

"She does not understand as yet, the whiteness in her is so white and the servants' hall is warm and pleasant and full of the laughter that ye sometimes hear and frown about. . . She knows no more than you do of the black heart beneath the white coat of the rascal that is so soft stepping and pleasant and keeps your silver so clean and bright an' says 'Very good, sir,' to everything the boss says to him——"

"Impossible!"

"Does it not happen every day? Do men and women leave off bein' men and women because they do your housework for you? Hearts as well as platters can break in the kitchen, and what do ye care what goes on among the help so long as your house is clean and quiet?

"Broken glass. . . ." Her voice rose with the rising wind, thinly. . . . "Wirra, wirra—an' a colleen as innocent of the danger of it as your baby that danced upon it unharmed—praise the saints!—unharmed. . . ."

Between anger and fright, Mrs. Waring leaned forward to pluck at the shawl which the other held about her head. . . . At the moment a shaft of light, probably the searchlight from some vessel close inshore—or was it something else?—fell upon the woman's face. It was gone so quickly that Mrs. Waring could not afterward swear to what

she had seen. No. Not Mrs. Magillcuddy's face, but similar. Lined and worn, singularly noble.

"Who are you?"

"Do ye ask me *that*?" said the Voice.

The flash of light having passed, it seemed so dark that now Mrs. Waring could not even distinguish the film of shadow that had showed where the woman stood.

"Do ye ask me that, mother that loves her children? What would ye do, then, if ye were dead, and your children's tears fell upon ye in purgatory? What would ye do if the feet of yer own colleen were standing among broken glass that is broken glass indeed?"

"Who are you?" whimpered Mrs. Waring. But the little moon had risen now and showed the moor empty except for the silent lights of the cottages where little children were.

As she stumbled at her own doorstep her butler opened the door with obsequious concern, and obvious amazement when she cried out—"Aileen—where is she?"

"In her room, I think, m'm; the children being asleep. Shall I call her, m'm?"

"No!"

She hurried to the attic room and knocked. The door was locked. Something stirred softly and opened. Aileen's frightened eyes sought her mistress's face. Mrs. Waring read dread of something having been stolen, of some terrible oversight in the nursery, of instant dismissal.

The girl coughed and shivered. She was wearing her coat but her little cap and apron were ready for instant duty. Mrs. Waring remembered with a shock of contrition that Martha had cried because Aileen's hands were cold as she dressed her.

"Aileen—" sobbed Mrs. Waring. . . . "Oh, you poor *little* thing—Come down, child, where it is warm!"

